

# Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind



## A road map to restructuring

*by*

Rep. Margaret Henbest

Rep. Kathy Skippen

Sen. Patti Anne Lodge

February 13, 2006

*Prepared by Legislative Services Office, Budget & Policy Analysis*

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Enrollment Trends.....	2
Deaf Education.....	4
Blind Education.....	6
Multihandicapped Students.....	8
New ISDB Agency Structure.....	9
Financial Analysis of Proposals.....	10

## Executive Summary

As the School for the Deaf and Blind (ISDB) observes its 100th anniversary, policymakers are examining its current operations, and contemplating its future role and mission. The timing is certainly appropriate. Like most residential-based schools for the deaf and/or blind around the country, ISDB has experienced a consistent decline in enrollment, which now stands at barely half of its 1992 level. This decline reflects the declining popularity of what is, essentially, a 19th century education model, in which challenging children are segregated from the general population of students, and sent away to be educated at a separate facility. Since the level of staffing on campus has remained largely intact throughout this decline, the natural result is a skyrocketing cost per pupil, with the staff now outnumbering the students. Usage of the campus infrastructure has also declined with the number of students, and 56% of the facility now lies unutilized.

ISDB also offers a day program for students who live within less than an hour of Gooding. Unlike the residential students, who only return home on weekends, day program students return home at the end of each school day, like any other public school student. This enables parents who happen to live in the western and central Magic Valley to access the more concentrated level of services available from ISDB, while still raising their child at home. This service, however, is only available to the relatively small number of children in Idaho who happen to live within an hour of the school. The vast majority of parents of deaf or blind children are forced to make the difficult choice of keeping the child at home, where the local school district may or may not be able to provide the level of service that is truly needed, or sending their child to Gooding for their education, and only seeing them on weekends.

There are also questions regarding the suitability of educating both deaf and blind students within the same program, given the unrelated nature of the two disabilities, and the differing strategies for overcoming them. Indeed, it would be hard to find two groups of children who would have a more difficult time communicating with each other than the deaf and the blind.

For these reasons, we are proposing that the Legislature replace the current residential service delivery model with a series of 5-6 regional day programs for deaf education, hosted by one school district in each region. These programs should provide an oral/auditory program for pre-K through first grade, and a Total Communication (sign language-based) program for K-12. Blind students should be mainstreamed, with the support of an enhanced Blind Outreach program, and intensive summer camps for teaching Braille, mobility, and other independent living skills.

As policymakers consider the future of deaf and blind education delivery models in Idaho, ISDB's impact on the local economy of Gooding cannot be ignored. ISDB's local annual payroll of \$5.4 million makes it the 3rd largest employer in the county. And while the path of least resistance is often to do nothing, this may not be the most attractive long-term option for Gooding. For barring an unlikely reversal of enrollment trends, it can be expected that enrollment at ISDB will continue to decline, and as a large and increasing proportion of deaf and blind children are educated in their home districts, the pressure to shift ISDB resources out of Gooding and into outreach programs will grow. The result will be that Gooding will have hitched itself to a fading economic star.

For these and other reasons, we are proposing that the Legislature consider a more effective and robust usage of the ISDB facility. Specifically, utilization as a substance abuse treatment center for the general population of the region, and a residential treatment program for female offenders statewide. A more detailed listing of recommendations, as they relate to the recommendations found in this Executive Summary, may be found at the end of most of the sections in this report, except for the substance abuse treatment center recommendation, which will be dealt with separately.

## Enrollment Trends

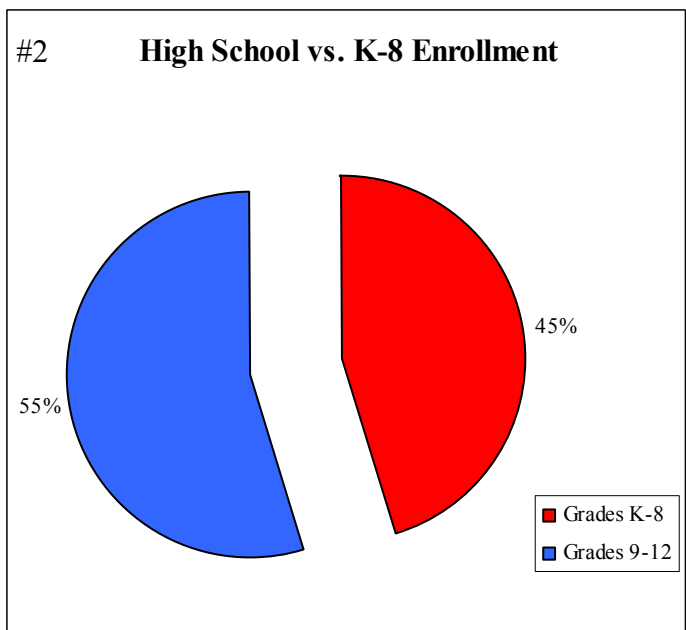
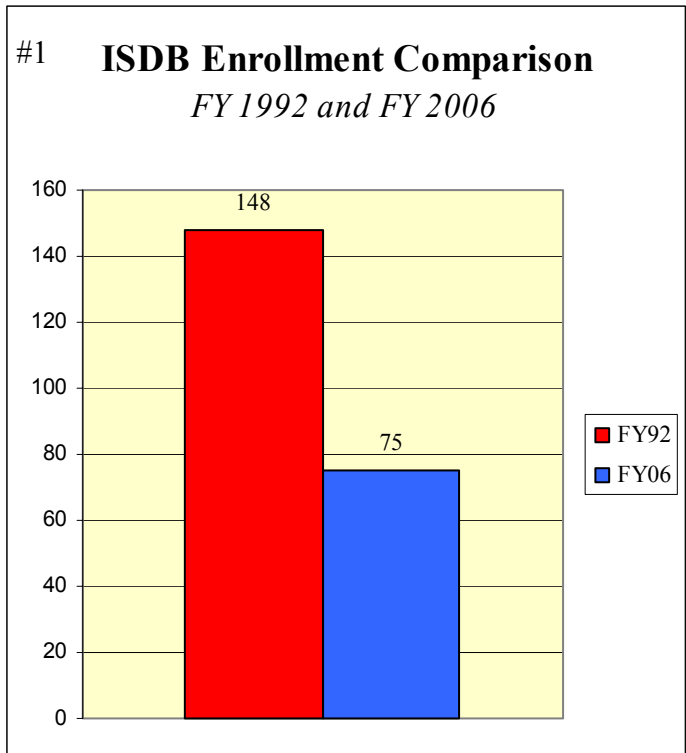
Student enrollment at ISDB has consistently declined over the last 14 years, from a high of 148 students in FY 1992, to the current level of 75 students in FY 2006 (see figure #1, right). This equates to an average enrollment decline of 4.7% a year for the last 14 years. Even when compared to the broader national decline of 18.3% in deaf/blind K-12 residential enrollment from 1992 to 2001, ISDB's decline has been precipitous. By comparison, the national numbers for student enrollment in deaf/blind day programs have been stable over the same period of time.

It should also be noted that ISDB's enrollment is heavily weighted towards high school students (see figure #2, right), with over half of the current students slated to graduate over the next four years. Indeed, 12th graders form the largest class, comprising 20% of the total student body.

Part of this disparity is to be expected, insofar as the residential area students (those students residing too far from Gooding to enjoy a Day Program option) are concerned. Most parents are understandably reluctant to send their elementary-age children away from home for their education.

Given this reality, it is perhaps not surprising that 87% of the students attending from residential areas of the state are Grades 6 and up. What is more surprising is that even the enrollment of Day Program area students is weighted towards Grades 6 and up, with two thirds of such students falling into the Grades 6 and up category, even though these students are bussed home at the end of each school day, just as they would be in a normal public school. By comparison, students Grades 6 and up comprise just over half of the average daily attendance in a typical Idaho school district.

Evidence of consistently declining enrollment begs the question "why?", and while many explanations can be offered, three stand out. The first is technological. The advent of new



technologies, such as cochlear implants, cannot be ignored. In the past, children who were born deaf could only hope to learn sign language, and interact with most of the hearing world through the medium of interpreters. Today, many parents of deaf children are opting for cochlear implants, which, with early training, offer these children the chance to hear, and interact normally with the hearing world, without dependence on interpreters.

As more children are given cochlear implants, it is to be expected that ISDB's pipeline of potential enrollees will dwindle further. And this only speaks to today's technology. Tomorrow's technology will, no doubt, bring further breakthroughs and refinements. Even the blind may one day be the beneficiaries of new, adaptive technologies, as the deaf are today.

The second reason for the decline is cultural. ISDB's educational model, at least insofar as its residential program is concerned, is a legacy of the 19th century. Perfected by the British aristocracy, this model involves removing children from their homes and educating them in an institutional setting. The model also enjoyed a lesser degree of popularity in this country, especially as it applied "difficult" populations of children, such as the deaf and the blind.

The problem is that the popularity of this model has been in decline for decades. Fewer parents are interested in sending their minor children to school away from home, and outside parental supervision. And while it is always possible that the popularity of this education model could enjoy a revival, the fundamental changes that have taken place in our society over the last 100 years make it unlikely.

The third reason is that these students' home school districts are, for the most part, doing a better job of providing the supplemental services that deaf and blind students need. As more parents have chosen to keep their deaf or blind children at home, school districts have gained more experience in meeting their needs.

Also, ISDB's own efforts to provide supplemental services, through its outreach program, should not be overlooked. In addition, federal funding passed through the Public Schools budget to local school districts has increased by 42% over the last three years.

Other reasons have been given as to why ISDB enrollment continues to decline. One involves the turmoil associated with the tenure of Angel Ramos as ISDB Superintendent, and his subsequent firing by the State Board of Education.

While the firing of Ramos certainly did nothing to generate good publicity for the school, an examination of trends shows that enrollment was declining before the hiring of Dr. Ramos, it was declining during the tenure of Dr. Ramos, and it has declined since the departure of Dr. Ramos. This is in spite of the fact that parental satisfaction with the school is high. It would not appear that the tenure of Dr. Ramos has had a significant effect on enrollment trends.

It has also been suggested that ISDB should offer to take residential students from states that have closed their deaf/blind schools. This idea does offer the prospect of a short-term solution to ISDB's intertwined problem of declining enrollment and rising costs per student. It could serve to stabilize or even expand, on a one-time basis, the number of students enrolled at ISDB. It could also defray the cost of running the school, in the form of tuition from other states.

What it would not do, however, is address the long-term problem. Taking in students from out-of-state could increase the numbers attending ISDB, on a one-time basis, but it would only serve to provide a new benchmark from which to continue the inexorable enrollment decline. As a result, it would only delay for a few more years the inevitable transformation of ISDB that must take place.

In summary, the enrollment trends affecting ISDB are as powerful as they are long-term. Taking in students from other states will not change this. New leadership at ISDB will not change this. As long as technology continues to advance and parents have choices, given our cultural mores, ISDB's enrollment will continue to decline.

This is not to say that there will not be individual years in which enrollment stabilizes, or even increases slightly. In two of the last 14 years, enrollment actually increased. This will not, however, affect the "end game" for ISDB's current model, which would involve enrollment of around 40 day program area students, and a handful of secondary residential students from around the state.

## Deaf Education

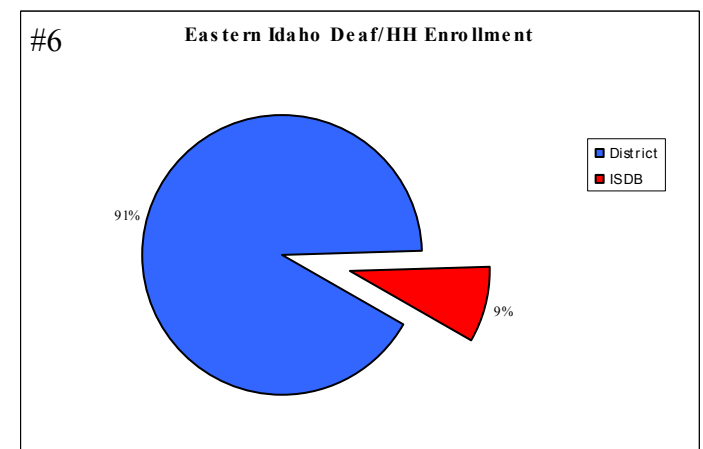
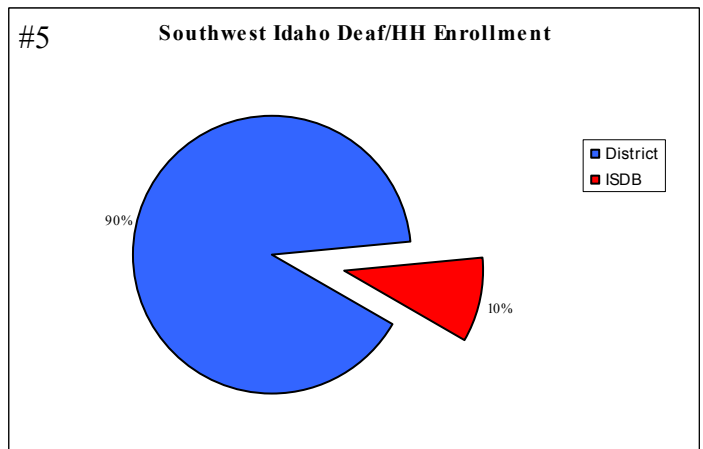
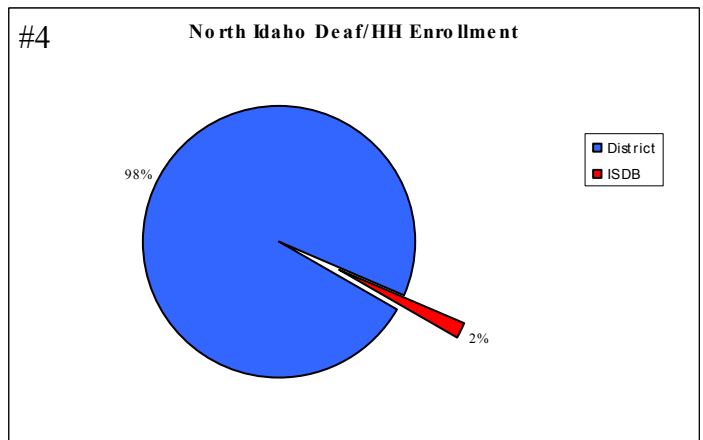
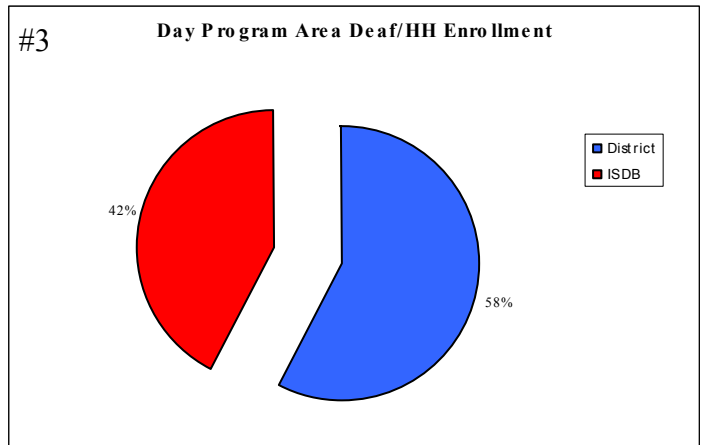
Of the 75 students currently served at ISDB's campus, 51 are audiolgically impaired. This group of 51 includes three who are also blind, and three that have other handicaps. About 55% of these students are enrolled from the day program area of western and central Magic Valley school districts, while 45% are from outside the area.

This enrollment distribution illustrates the strong preference of most parents for day program services, as opposed to a residential program. While the day program area school districts only comprise 8% of the student enrollment in Idaho, they contribute 55% of the audiolgically impaired students at ISDB.

The graphs, at right, which are based on FY 2005 data, show the popularity of the day program, in that 42% of the audiolgically impaired students in day program area school districts attend ISDB. By comparison, 2% of the audiolgically impaired students from North Idaho (Regions I and II) are served at ISDB. In Southwest Idaho (Regions III and IV), less than 10% are served at ISDB, while in Eastern Idaho (Regions VI and VII), the figure is 9%.

These figures highlight the importance of providing these specialized services closer to home. It is no coincidence that audiolgically impaired students that live the furthest from the ISDB campus (North Idaho students), who are also the only students who must board airplanes every week to attend at ISDB, are also the students least likely to attend.

It certainly cannot be said that audiolgically impaired children in North Idaho, Southwest Idaho, and Eastern Idaho have less need for specialized services than do children in the day program area of the Magic Valley. The facts show that when a specialized program of instruction is made available to audiolgically impaired children in a region, over 40% of the students take advantage of it, either because it meets a need that the local school district lacks the resources to provide, or provides for greater



social interaction with students and others that can communicate through sign language. Given the intense social isolation experienced by many audiolgically impaired students, due to the lack of a common language with the non-signing world, this latter reason should not be underestimated.

These specialized services, however, should not be readily available to only 8% of the students in the state. They are needed by audiolgically impaired children all over Idaho.

For these reasons, we are recommending that the state provide a new use for the ISDB campus in Gooding—one that more fully utilizes the existing facilities—and that deaf education be provided on a regional basis, through at least five day programs. While the current ISDB site provides day program service access to only 8% of the students in the state, five regional day programs, if offered in Coeur d'Alene, Lewiston, Canyon County, Twin Falls, and Blackfoot, would reach 83% of the students in the state.

Our recommendations for the service delivery, governance, and funding of these regional programs are as follows:

#### Locations

- 1.) Regional day programs would be located in the following areas:
  - a.) Kootenai or Bonner counties
  - b.) Nez Perce or Latah counties
  - c.) Canyon or Ada counties
  - d.) Twin Falls, Gooding, Jerome, Cassia, or Minidoka counties
  - e.) Bingham County (if funding can be found to fund six programs, the fifth and sixth programs should be located in Bannock and Bonneville counties)

#### Program Structure & Services

- 2.) Programs would be staffed and run by a local school district in the designated area, under a service agreement negotiated with ISDB, at a school district-provided location.
- 3.) Each student's home school district would continue to be responsible for the student's individualized education plan (IEP).

4.) Programs would include an auditory/oral program for pre-Kindergarten through 1st grade, which would serve children with cochlear implants or some residual hearing, and a total communication (sign language-based) program for grades K-12.

5.) Program would include speech/language therapy services.

6.) Students would be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities in the host district.

7.) Eligibility criteria for should be set for Total Communication program admission based on the South Dakota rule of 24:05:24.01:08.

#### Funding

8.) Programs would receive funding from the state based on the lesser of \$50,000 per student or the level of state funding that would be provided if the program were a stand alone charter school, with access to the support unit minimums in Section 33-1002, Idaho Code.

9.) Based on a 40% attendance rate for students outside the host district, but within an hour's drive of each regional site, 100% attendance for students within the host district, and attendance of those students within an hour's drive who currently attend ISDB, the estimated number of students and state cost of each regional program is as follows:

Coeur d'Alene: 12 students; \$600,000

Lewiston: 15 students; \$750,000

Canyon County: 63 students; \$1.1 million

Twin Falls: 64 students; \$1.1 million

Blackfoot: 25 students; \$1.1 million

TOTAL COST: \$4,650,000

#### Transportation

10.) Each student's home school district would be responsible for transporting any students to the program, provided the program site is within an hour's drive. Districts could contract with other districts, ISDB, or create a consortium to provide this service.

11.) Eligible costs associated with transporting students to and from the program would be funded at the standard 85% state match, and such costs would not be subject the statewide transportation cost cap.

## Blind Education

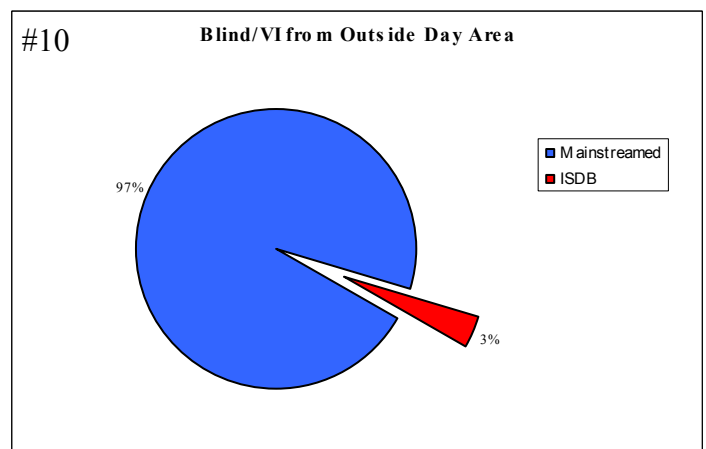
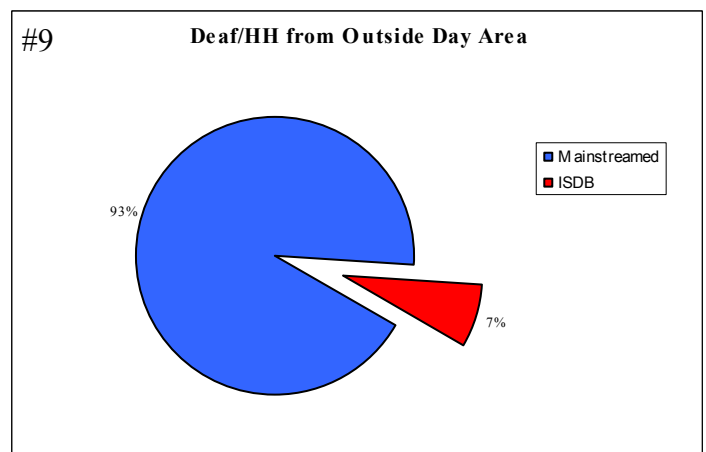
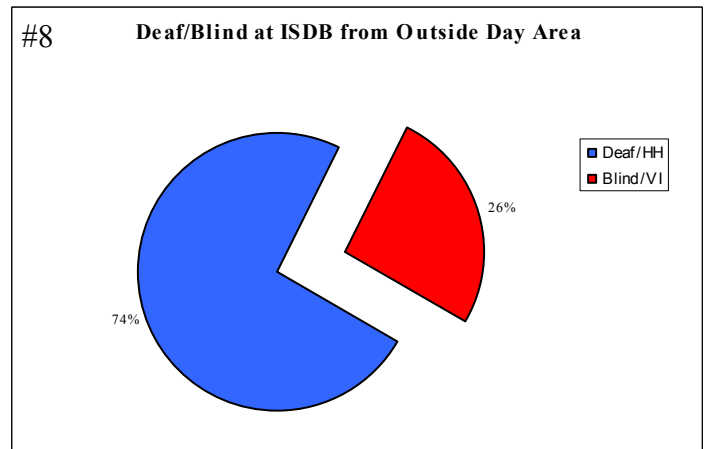
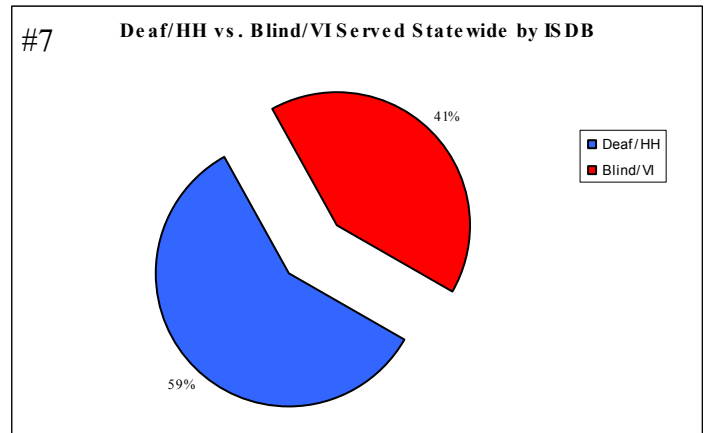
Of the 75 students currently served at ISDB's campus, 27 are visually impaired. This group of 27 includes three who are also deaf, and five that have other handicaps. Over 70% of these students are enrolled from the day program area of western and central Magic Valley school districts, while 30% are from outside the area.

This enrollment distribution illustrates the strong preference of most parents for day program services, as opposed to a residential program. While the day program area school districts only comprise 8% of the student enrollment in Idaho, they contribute 70% of the visually impaired students at ISDB.

It also tends to support the fact that visually impaired students are, by and large, more easily mainstreamed than audiotically impaired students. Once visually impaired students are given the necessary coping skills (Braille, mobility training), they can usually be mainstreamed into a "normal" public school room, due to the fact that they can follow classroom work with a Braille textbook, and can interact and communicate with the teacher and other students through the medium of the spoken word.

If visually impaired students were as difficult to mainstream as audiotically impaired students, one would expect at least 40% of the students attending ISDB from outside the day program area to be visually impaired, since 41% of the students served by ISDB statewide are visually impaired (see Figure #7, at right, includes those served through outreach). However, less than a quarter of those students actually attending from outside the day program area are visually impaired (Figure #8).

Figures #9 and #10 also show how visually impaired students are more easily mainstreamed, with 3% of such students attending ISDB from outside the day program area, while 7% of audiotically impaired students do so.





Given these facts, we are recommending the following:

#### Program Structure & Services

12.) Visually impaired students should be educated in their home school districts, with the assistance of ISDB's outreach program.

13.) An additional blind outreach employee should be hired in each region in which a current visually impaired ISDB student will be mainstreamed (Magic Valley, Southwest Idaho, and Clearwater regions).

14.) Summer camps should be held at Idaho's public university sites, or the new building of the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, in order to provide intensive training for visually impaired students in the areas of Braille and mobility skills. Staffing, coordination, and instruction would be provided by ISDB blind outreach personnel.

15.) Braille camps should be focused on children grades K-3, and should be held just prior to the beginning of the school year.

16.) Mobility training camps should be focused on secondary age students.

#### Funding

17.) In addition to the resources that ISDB currently devotes to blind outreach, an additional \$180,000 will be required to fund the three new outreach positions outlined above.

18.) Summer camps should cost no more than \$100,000. This would cover costs such as transporting children to the camps and back home at their conclusion, room and board, and instructional materials.

## Multihandicapped Students

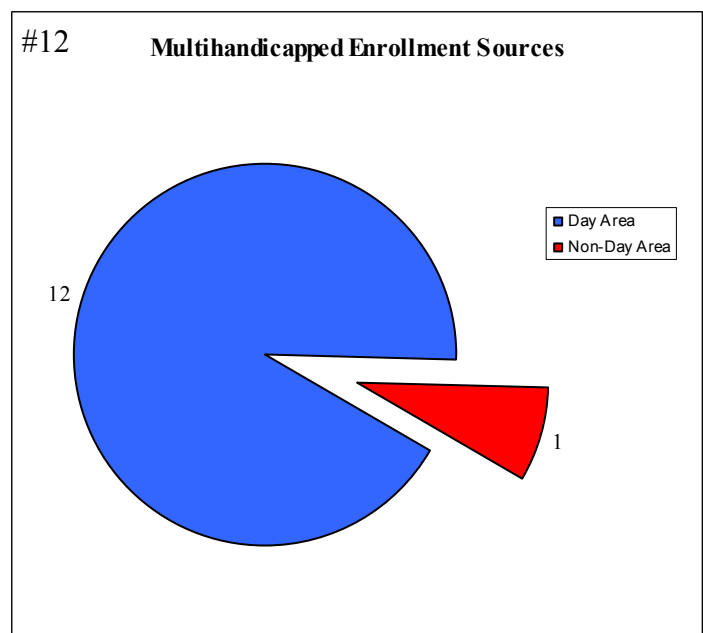
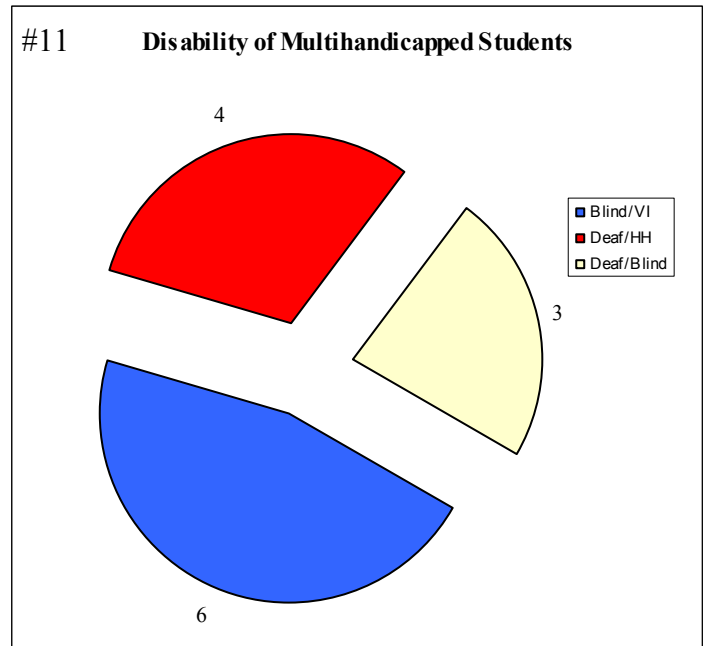
In addition to students that are deaf and blind, ISDB also provides educational services for students in which deafness or blindness is only one of the handicaps present. September 2005 enrollment figures show that thirteen of the school's 75 students fell into this "multihandicap" category. Most of these students suffer from mental impairments, as well as the deafness or blindness. It is the deafness or blindness impairment, however, that enables the student to be sent to ISDB.

As Figure #11, at right, shows, nearly half of such multihandicapped students suffer from a combination of blindness and other impairments. The multihandicapped category also includes students that suffer from deafness and other mental impairments, and students that are both deaf and blind.

An enrollment analysis of multihandicapped students leads to questions regarding how much real demand for this service exists. As Figure #12, at right, shows, all but one of the 13 multihandicapped students at ISDB attend from the day program area of the school. Only one student, from Middleton, attends from the 92% of student population that lives outside the day program area.

This strongly suggests that ISDB's services for multihandicapped students represent a program of convenience for school districts in the day program area, enabling these districts to place expensive and challenging special needs children with ISDB, and thereby avoiding the costs that other school districts around the state must deal with as a matter of routine. When an agency that is charged with providing statewide services offers a service, such as this, that has ceased to be a meaningful statewide service, and has instead become an instrument of local convenience and cost avoidance, it behooves the state to consider the reallocation of scarce resources to other areas, where broader benefits can be made available.

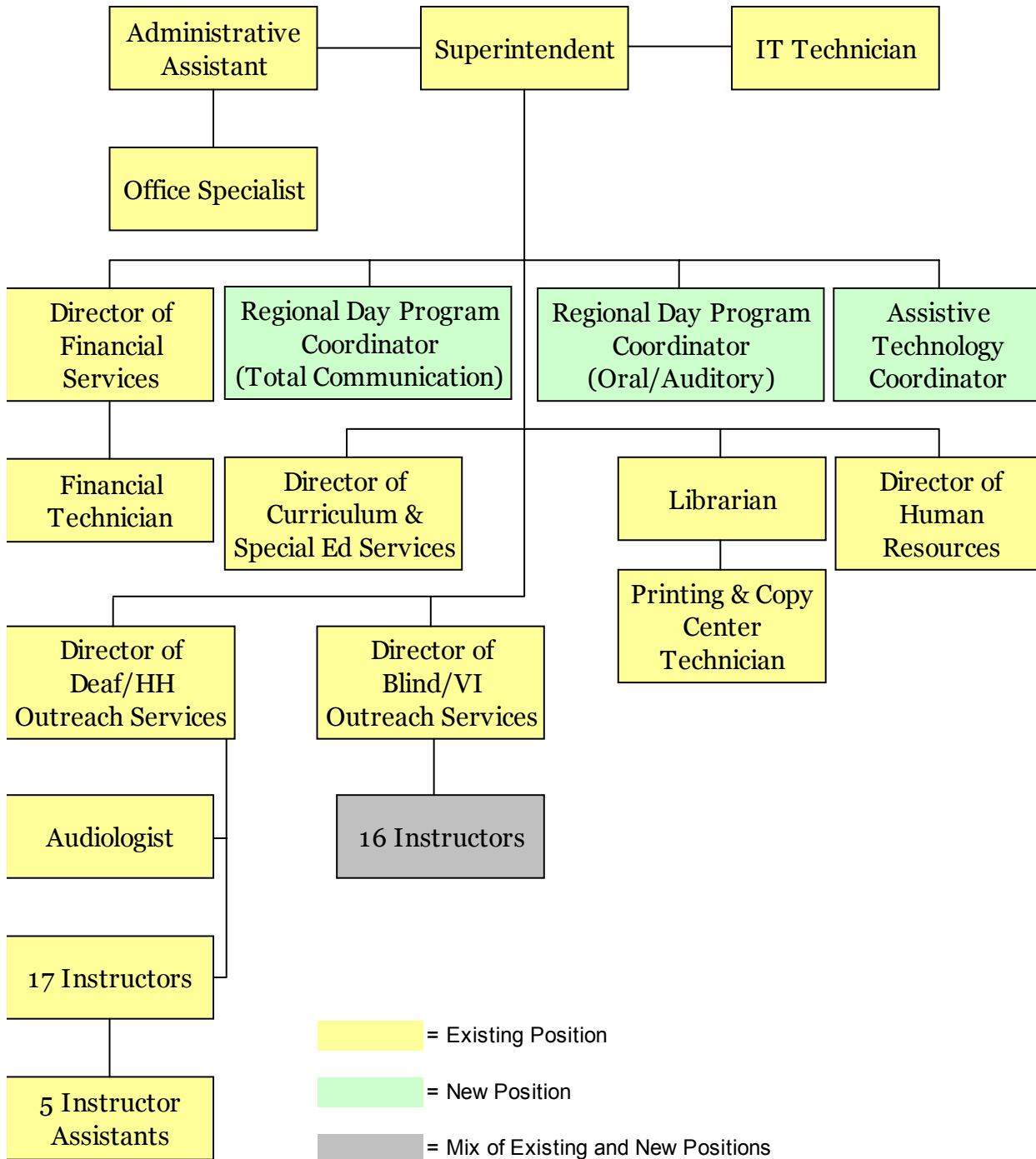
Our recommendation for multihandicapped



students is as follows:

19) All visually-impaired multihandicapped students, and those audilogically-impaired multihandicapped students whose other impairments render them unable to participate in the program of instruction in the regional day programs, should be treated as (all but one of) such students generally are in the 92% of school districts outside the day program area, where they are served by their local school district or in an institutionalized setting, such as a group home or the Idaho State School and Hospital, or a combination of the above.

# New ISDB Agency Structure



## Financial Analysis of Proposals

The figures, below, reflect the breakout of projected costs for the new ISDB agency and service structure recommended by the report:

1.	Regional Deaf/HH Day Programs	
	A.) Kootenai/Bonner County (Coeur d'Alene)	\$600,000
	B.) Nez Perce/Latah Counties (Lewiston)	\$750,000
	C.) Canyon/Ada Counties (Canyon)	\$1,100,000
	D.) Any Magic Valley county except Lincoln (Twin Falls)	\$1,100,000
	E.) Bingham	<u>\$1,100,000</u>
	Day Programs Subtotal:	\$4,650,000
2.	Deaf/HH Day Program Transportation (state match)	\$516,700
3.	Existing Outreach Program FY06 Cost	\$1,952,900
4.	Three Additional Blind/VI Outreach Instructors	\$180,000
5.	Blind/VI Summer Camps	\$100,000
6.	ISDB non-Outreach Program Personnel Costs	\$780,000
7.	ISDB non-Outreach Program Other Costs	\$125,000
8.	Grand Total:	\$8,304,600
9.	Current ISDB FY06 Program Cost	\$8,155,600
10.	Estimated Added Cost of New Model	\$149,000